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ABSTRACT

The film, "Telling an Old Story" (part of the series "Writers Writing" that was coproduced by WNET and Learning Designs and televised by WNET in 1985), was integrated into college developmental writing classes and proved to be an effective strategy for the improvement of students' writing skills. The film was presented with the emphasis on the problem/solution sequence--as a kind of mystery story rather than as an "educational film." The students saw the film twice, the first time with strategic stops for discussion and comparison free writing. Then, for greater student involvement, only the audio portion was run with the discussions about writing edited into a single sequence. The students drew parallels between writing and filmmaking, agreeing not only that the cinematic approach to writing a story is sometimes more effective or striking, but also that writing is much like film editing. The film has motivated the students to be more thorough, more patient; they are now more convinced that writing is indeed a process and they are more willing to be guided by it and better able to exert control over it. In short, their exposure to the film helped them to write with both greater freedom and more discipline. They wrote better, but more importantly, they became more fully and creatively engaged with writing. (NKA)

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TELLING AN OLD STORY:

RINGSIDE AT BROOKLYN COLLEGE AND AT NYU

Frederick K. Lang

My report to WNET/Thirteen and Learning Designs on how I integrated the film Telling an Old Story into the courses I taught during Fall 1984. This film is the second in Writers Writing, a series co-produced by WNET and Learning Designs, and televised during Spring 1985.

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CS 210 230

Preliminary

I'm teaching three courses this semester: two six-hour courses at Brooklyn College, one three-hour course at New York University. One of my courses at Brooklyn is called "developmental writing," meaning that all of the students enrolled in it have failed the CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test--the CWAT. A passing score on the CWAT is an 8. At Brooklyn, the writing courses that are "developmental"--or, more bluntly, "remedial"--have two distinct levels: there is one for students with a score of 6, another for those with a 4. This semester I'm teaching a course at the lower level: that is, my students are, according to the CWAT criteria, among the weakest writers at Brookyn College. My other course at Brooklyn is called "developmental reading": all the students enrolled in it have failed the CUNY Reading Skills Assessment Test--the CRAT.

Nearly all my students at Brooklyn are SEEK: minority students who are "culturally disadvantaged." Throughout CUNY it is the SEEK students who are considered the most difficult to teach. The success rate in SEEK programs--that is, the percentage of students who pass the CWAT and the CRAT at the end of a year of developmental courses--has always been low in comparison with that in other remedial programs. I can't resist adding that my own success rate with the CWAT has been excellent. (I don't know yet about

the CRAT: this is the first semester in which I've been assigned a reading course. At Brooklyn success in one area is often rewarded with the opportunity to go and do likewise in another.) I'm quite good at teaching even SEEK students to write, partly because I realize that succeeding with "nontraditional" students requires innovative methods, such as using films like those in the WRITERS WRITING series.

At NYU I teach in an adult education program. My course, Writing Workshop I, is the first in a required two-semester sequence. Almost all the students I have are taking their first semester of college courses. Some of them are taking only my course. They range in age from twenty to sixty, and the variation in writing skill is just as great. At the "top" are the students who write as part of their occupation, or who have been writing on their own; they are quite proficient, or will be after a semester in my Writing Workshop. At the "bottom" are the students who have written almost nothing for periods as long as thirty years; they have done poorly on the entrance exam and have been admitted into the program on probation--that is, they are allowed to take one course and it must be the first semester of the Writing Workshop sequence. A couple of these students have writing skills on a par with those of my CWAT 4's at Brooklyn College.

I've described my three classes in some detail to indicate how diverse an audience Telling an Old Story was presented to. I was very fortunate in that regard and, I hope, did all I could to exploit the situation. My first impulse was to write a separate report for each group of students. I quickly decided, though, that excessive repetition would result from that approach. With each of my three classes I tried the same activities and assignments; the only variations were in the degree of difficulty. Still, in what follows I sometimes differentiate among my classes with regard to particular responses. The research on developmental writing usually refers to students in courses like mine at Brooklyn as "basic writers"--a phrase I find both inept and demeaning. (I'm afraid to ask how students in developmental reading courses are referred to.) As for my students at NYU, I would find it awkward to refer to them simply as "adults," particularly since many of my Brooklyn students are in their mid- or late twenties (SEEK students tend to enter college relatively late). "Returning learners," a label recently come into vogue, is much too spurious for my taste. Thus, in distinguishing one group of students from another, I resort to phrases such as "my writing students at Brooklyn," "my students at NYU"--blunt and wordy characterizations for which I apologize. Because their activities and assignments were basically the same, I'm usually able to regard my three groups as a

single entity, and so get by with simply saying, "my class," "my students" or, when I'm feeling particularly enthusiastic, "my writers."

Round One: Pre-Viewing Activities

As I saw it, the best way to prepare my students for the film was to get them involved in activities like those they would find Madeleine Blais involved in. I wanted them to face similar problems, to sweat out the same kinds of dilemmas. That way, I thought, they would experience what Madeleine said and did in the film, not as a species of instruction, but a validation of the course of action to which they had already committed themselves. To a great extent that's what happened. My students devised solutions, invented tactics, made discoveries--all of which the film later verified and reinforced. That Madeleine's article on Elvis became an impetus to and paradigm for extended writing assignments occurred only because my students had taught themselves, or at least had begun to teach themselves, the principles underlying its construction. By the time my students got to the film, certainly by the time they got to the article, it was a matter of seeing an approach to writing that was, if not an "old story," at least a recognizable one.

The first problem I had to consider was the inexperience of my students. I didn't want to put off showing the film

past mid-October, but I needed enough time to give them opportunities to observe, record, arrange, rearrange, and so on--enough time first to expose them to the writing process and then to help them integrate it into their lives. Could I have shown the film whenever I thought it would prove most effective, I would have chosen the second semester, both at Brooklyn College and at NYU. That's simply because by then my students would have been even better able to appreciate it. In their first semester, particularly in the early part, students like mine are still going through an initiation, a rite of passage; they are working on a scale much smaller than that on which a professional writer works. By the second semester, with thousands of words behind each of them, they feel more like full-fledged members of the writing community.

Still, as I've indicated, I tried to maintain a similarity in kind. The activities and assignments I describe are essentially scaled down versions of the "writer's work" Madeleine discusses and undertakes in the film. But they are also appropriate for first-semester writing students. It was a matter of effecting a difference solely in degree: a difference that had to be greater in the first semester than it would have had to be in the second, greater at Brooklyn College than at NYU.

All my students keep a journal, even my reading students, who are being taught writing by a colleague. (So far my

reading students haven't been confused by my treating them to a different, more liberated style of writing instruction.) By "journal," I mean simply a notebook in which they do freewriting exercises. My students are required to write at least ten minutes a day, five days a week. At Brooklyn my classes meet three days a week, at NYU two. During each of these meetings my students and I do freewriting together. So I'm positive that I'm getting about half the freeewriting I ask for. In addition, my assignments--at least in the first few weeks--require that relevant freewriting excerpts be typed up and turned in along with the essay: that is, I get to see the "raw material" as well as the "finished product."

The point of this short disquistion on methodology is that what I would have had my students do anyway is roughly analogous to what they would see Madeleine do in the film. She has her reporter's notes; my students have their free-writing journals. In selecting a focus for her article, she must decide which portions of her notes to draw upon, to appropriate; my students must decide which portions of their freewriting fit together, which portions might coalesce into the rough draft of a short essay with a single focus.

Other parallels already existed. Just as Madeleine gets feedback from John, so my students get it from me and, more importantly, from one another.

A reporter relies upon observation and interview for material; my students learn to take a good look at and share with one another. I quickly realized that, without altering the activities I use to get things off the ground at the beginning of the first semester, without changing my tried and true English teacher shthick, I would be anticipating the home truths about writing that the film animated with such subtle insistence. Where I did alter my instruction to accommodate the film was in the attention I gave to <u>form</u> and <u>beginnings</u>. But, as I've said, my intention was to have my students "go and do like Madeleine," to some extent anyway, before they met her. So, before presenting the film, I turned both to my students' own writing and to published work (it'll soon be obvious why I say "work" rather than "writing"). That went like this: A student would read a portion of his/her freewriting and would ask the others in the class what they found most striking--what they thought was so significant or so arresting that it should go first. Most of my students, when asked to write freely, compose a species of narrative, sometimes jumbled, but often religiously chronological. So, in the initial exercises, it was simply a matter of selecting, with a little help from friends, that event which deserved to come first because, in many respects, it was primary. In effect, we were replacing "beginnings" with "openings."

The next step was to present in the form of flashback those events that preceded chronologically the one warranting the "up front" position. (Of course, no one--not even among my remedial students--had to be told what a "flashback" was.) I never mention grammar to my classes unless I'm making a point about its contribution to the efficacy of a particular piece of writing. I like to think that I talk about "powerful" grammar rather than just "good" grammar. With Madeleine's article in mind, I had my students use the present tense for the portion of the narrative that "dominated"--that provided both an opening and a focus. The past tense was for those narrative portions presented as flashbacks. We were using tense to overturn time, grammar to improve upon chronology.

There was of course a great deal of confusion at first. It's difficult to change the order of what one has written, difficult both psychologically and practically. It's also difficult to remember changes once they have been decided upon. We tried a number of approaches to these problems we had created. Numbering sections of the narrative helped. The new numerical sequence could then be simply recorded and later referred to, during the writing of a first draft, let's say. Index cards provedeven more useful. (To a great extent, liberation from chronology can be accomplished only by abandoning the page, only through a willful disruption of linear presentation. In other words, once the freewriting has been done and an opening chosen, the journals

should be temporarily shelved.) The freewriting excerpts a student wished to retain were transcribed onto index cards, sometimes sentence by sentence, then rearranged in the sequence that carried the most impact. Many students tried writing on index cards during the initial freewriting stage so that they would have flexibility without the hassle of transcription. (Here the larger cards proved more suitable than the smaller.) No matter what practical approach they each took, my students were learning how to free their material from chronological presentation, how to find forms that were both riskier and more organic. They were becoming more and more skilled at, and disposed towards, breaking away from the most obvious and perhaps hardest to resist of all the standard structures that textbooks on writing extol.

We used other material besides that generated during bouts of freewriting. I handed out lists of important events in the lives of several historical figures. (For each student in the class, a different figure, and so a different list--almanacs are very useful in this regard.) Each event was dated and described, and the idea of course was to rearrange the list into an unchronological narrative, using flashbacks and signaling them by switching from the present tense to the past.

As the lists got longer we again relied on index cards to make the rearranging more convenient. Finally, we were ready for larger units of prose: transcriptions of

interviews, and excerpts from diaries. I used Robert Lyons' Autobiography: A Reader for Writers at NYU and xeroxed portions for my Brooklyn students. The first section of that text contains only transcribed interviews and diary excerpts. (The only other writing text I would recommend is Scholes and Comley's The Practice of Writing. In fact some of the material I used at this point in the proceedings I filched from Scholes and Comley, and I adapted one of their suggested assignments.) I asked my students to treat these pieces of "published work" as raw material. Transcriptions of interviews, like those from Studs Terkel's Working, are particularly good in that they are very much like students' own freewriting, and so quite unintimidating, quite amenable to creative rearrangement. (I even used the transcription of the interview with Anthony in Before the First Word.) When we got to Terkel's interview with a disgruntled telephone operator, we decided that at the beginning she wasn't saying very much, that she was simply letting herself get used to being interviewed. Later on, she began to feel relaxed enough to talk about how she really felt towards her job. Most of the class agreed that her recitation of the seven or eight questions she is allowed to ask a customer would be an ideal opening. We then turned the interview into a narrative, writing about her day-to-day routine in the present tense and employing our past tense/flashback technique to work in background.

Our reconstituting of this interview is emblematic of the way we dealt with all the transcriptions and diary excerpts we encountered.

As the units of print became longer, we became more dependent on gimmicks for managing it all. Cut-out portions taped to index cards proved necessary when the material ran more than two pages. The hassle of cutting and taping was more than compensated for by the way a pack of rearranged cards facilitated rewriting: one hand holding the pen, the other turning over the cards.

There was a continual interplay between my students' freewriting--the words scrawled on the page--and the published work they were using freely--the rough words in print. Those students who had been hesitant about rearranging what they had written were loosened up by the experience of shuffling a deck of cards created by the "mutilation" of a printed source. Those who had believed in the sanctity of print became less reverential after they had their own prose "resectioned." Replacing a beginning with an opening, and then devising a new form to accord with that decision, became a game that all my students enjoyed and learned to play well. They were now ready for the film, which would offer them, among many other things, a parallel to their own efforts. From firsthand experience, they already knew something about rejecting routine or preconceived forms, about immersing oneself in the material to discover its

secrets: its most arresting shape, that one seemingly inevitable way of telling the story.

Round Two: Viewing

Telling an Old Story is a more subtle film than either Before the First Word or Pieces of a Puzzle. As a result, it is even more important that it be presented creatively, and presented more than once. The way in which the film is shown to students should, I feel, follow from the way in which it is constructed. Madeleine at one point mentions the importance of "tension" in composing a story. To a great extent, the film works by generating tension, by setting up or revealing a problem and then delaying the disclosure of its solution. There is a sequence of problems and solutions, a series of "mystery stories." Finding the answer to a problem, the solution to a mystery, releases tension, relieves uneasiness. But in Telling an Old Story the suspense is never really defused, not even, as we shall see, at the very end of the film. When one mystery is solved, one question answered, another is quickly posed. In fact, each solution, every answer, gives rise to another mystery, a further question.

So: Whom will Madeleine write about? Elvis Yero. How will she write about Elvis? (Once the search for content ends, that for form immediately begins.) What sort of form, structure, will Madeleine select, discover? The boxing match.

Will Elvis win or lose the match--will he win or lose in his struggle for citizenship, fame,a fast car? He both wins and loses. He is cleared of the charges against him, but he loses the match. (Ingeniously, the question of Elvis's guilt or innocence is interwoven with that of whether or not he will win in the ring.) What happens to Elvis afterwards? But Madeleine has returned home. The final question, the last mystery, remains in suspension. (Even at the end of the article, which my students eagerly read in the hope of getting more information on Elvis, of learning about the future the film withholds from us, we are left only with Elvis's words, his promises: we "hear," but we don't "see.")

All of this may sound like somewhat of a "film school" analysis, but understanding the manner in which the film both unfolds and contains its story is the key to the kind of creative presentation of it that I've advocated. It is of course debatable how creative my own presentation was, but I did try to emphasize the problem/solution sequence, telling my students to think of this, not as an "educational film," but as a kind of mystery story. As for the rest of my preamble, I simply talked briefly about the WRITERS WRITING series and said that Madeleine Blais was the writer in this particular film. I also wrote her name on the board--but shewas the only "character" I mentioned.

My first showing to each of my groups was a piecemeal affair, guided by the questions I enumerated above when

I talked about the film's "delayed revelations." I would stop the film at a critical point, ask the class what they thought the answer to the question would be, and how they would have solved the problem--what would you do if you were in Madeleine's position? After we discussed various possibilities and examined the rationale for each, I would start the film again so that we could see, not the "right" answer or the "correct" solution, but the one that Madeleine opted for. (Her rationale would be discussed when I stopped the film again at another critical point: that is, while discussing possible solutions to one problem we would also analyze, and criticize, Madeleine's solution to the previous one.)

This, specifically, is what I did and, more importantly, how my students responded: I stopped the film for the first time after the scenes in which Elizabeth Verrick appeared as the ostensible subject of Madeleine's story. After experimenting, I found that the best place for this "cut" came just before Madeleine and John have their first session, the focus of which was of course Elizabeth Verrick. I wrote her name on the board, and made sure that everyone understood who she was and, generally, what kind of person she was. (My NYU students caught on more quickly than my Brooklyn students, though the latter groups weren't far behind.) We discussed Elizabeth Verrick as a subject, the pros and cons of choosing her to write about.

I stopped the film a second time just before Elvis came into the "foreground": during the scene in which he was working out, just before Madeleine revealed that he was her choice. (Needless to say, my timing got better with practice: by my third presentation I got it just right.) At this point I asked the class whom they would choose to write about if they were Madeleine. At both Brooklyn and NYU, there were few votes for either Elvis or the inmates--Elizabeth Verrick won by a landslide. (Surprisingly, when I took another vote at the end of the film, she won by almost the same wide margin.)

My third "cut." That came just before Madeleine said she'd decided on the three-round structure. My question was, obviously: How would you do it? What form would you use to tell the story of Elvis Yero? That's a difficult question to answer when all the facts, including the most interesting facts, have yet to come in. But my students weren't at a loss: they realized why I had had them work on selecting, arranging, and so on, before showing them the film. A number of specific ideas were offered in both discussion and in freewriting--many students were able to anticipate Madeleine's opening: after all, a boxer's "main event" is obviously going to take place in a boxing ring. But I wasn't interested in whether or not my students could guess what particular form Madeleine would choose. I wanted them to think about, and participate in, her

struggle as well as Elvis's, to consider various ways in which this "old story" could be made to seem new. Most of my writers agreed that a chronological approach would only emphasize that this was a familiar story, that an old-fashioned form might make the material seem common, routine. Since my students had been prepared for it--or, I should say, since they had prepared themselves for it--they were well able to appreciate the striking use of flashback in the boxing sequence: Elvis's struggle with law and government interwoven with his struggle in the ring.

I stopped the film a fourth time just before the outcome of the fightwas decided, just before the referee made it clear that this justwasn't Elvis's day. Another vote: will Elvis win? Most of the class thought that he would. When I asked why, Elvis's supporters noted that his victory would be part of the "old story." Comparisons with Rocky Balboa were of course made. (A Rocky poster is visible in an early scene.) But most of the movie buffs in the class had to be reminded that Rocky lost in the first film in the series--that his victorywas in having gone the distance.

A number of my Brooklyn students, one of them an amateur boxer, argued that Elvis would lose because he was just not a good fighter. They also pointed out that his opponent, Clifford Gray, had nearly five times as much experience in the ring: one hundred forty-five fights,

one hundred and thirty-five of which he had won. (Elvis had won twenty-nine fights and lost one.) That the students supporting Clifford Gray were black, as he is, may have led them to identify with him, but their arguments for his superiority as a boxer were based on the record and on what they had seen of Elvis's performance both in training and in the ring. (What happened to Clifford Gray? Another mystery, one of the film's many "sub" mystery stories. Research is now in progress. I might add that this project was suggested and has been undertaken by Clifford Gray's supporters. This film results in a great deal of spontaneous combustion--not as much as Pieces of a Puzzle, but a great deal.)

Then all the way through to the end. Most of my students were surprised when they discovered that this "old story" had a new twist; Elvis lost. And what we had said earlier about the first Rocky film seemed even more pertinent now. We all did some freewriting on how Elvis compared with Rocky Balboa. Most of my writers saw an analogy and "rationalized" Elvis's defeat into a victory: he had gone the distance, he had been cleared, he had made up his mind not to lose again, and so on. A few remained unconvinced, though--they thought Elvis too shallow to understand the significance of his struggle. In fact, a few among these few didn't believe in Elvis's innocence. At Brooklyn I have three minority students who have lived

in Miami. According to them, it is very rare to be young, Cuban, a resident of Miami, and not to be involved at least marginally in criminal activity or in street fights. Some of my NYU students remembered Somebody Up There Likes Me, and recalled that Rocky Graziano had a felony conviction.

I had my students do more "comparison" freewriting, this time on the parallels between Madeleine's struggle and Elvis's. Many of them felt that the key difference was one of goal: Elvis seeks fame and fortune, Maddy a job well done. And then I showed the film a second time: this was an uninterrupted presentation. (At NYU the second showing took place on another day.) In the bout of freewriting that followed, we focused on what we had missed the first time around. As I'd anticipated, it was the visual component of the film that had dominated in the first presentation--the "story": it wasn't until my students had seen the film a second time that they could fully appreciate and respond to Madeleine's narration and her conversations with John--the auditory component, the "telling." They could of course remember that she had discussed writing, had announced her choice of Elvis, and so on; but not until after the second presentation could they recall specifically what Madeleine had said about focus, structure, tension. Only when they had become completely familiar with the content could my students participate fully in the search for form. (As I've said, of the three films in the

series this is the one which must, absolutely, be shown at least twice.)

To get my students even more involved in Madeleine's struggle, to persuade them to "listen" to her even more closely, I ran only the audio portion of the film and in such a way that the discussions about writing were edited into a single sequence. It's easy to "bury" the video portion--the brightness control on the monitor can be turned all the way down. But it's very difficult to isolate particular portions of the audio track. It's a matter of recording numbers from the VCR counter--starting points and end points. I could do this with some degree of accuracy only on my third try. My students came to my assistance and did some "scanning," "searching," and so on. But I never quite got the hang of the subtler operations a VCR can perform. (It occurred to me while attempting this stunt with the audio that most of my students, particularly at Brooklyn, could do what I was trying to do better than I could. After all, it's their technology. I welcomed their help, but I could imagine other instructors getting uptight, becoming resistant to the idea of surrendering a little authority. In my opinion, students wil be more at ease with the WRITERS WRITING series than teachers, just as they find flashbacks more "natural" than straight chronology.)

Once they could hear Madeleine without "distractions," once she came through to them loud and clear, my students

were able to follow her very easily. Because of her demeanor and lucidness, they had no trouble with her terminology, such as it was, and her explanation of "technical" matters. They admitted that they were more responsive to her than they would be to a teacher because she was talking about writing from the "inside," simply commenting on her own struggle and not trying to lay down the law. (This response made me glad that I always do assignments along with my students. In fact, the class was generous enough to draw comparisons between the demonstration/discussion intermeshing they had seen in the film and that which they had witnessed in my classroom.)

We then got into a discussion about, and did some freewriting on, the parallels between writing and filmmaking. The class saw that the cinematic approach to writing a story is not sometimes simply more effective or striking, but that using flashback, the interweaving of various narrative strands or levels, is inevitable if the full story is to be told. The only way to reveal what's going on psychologically as well as physically is to juxtapose, splice together, two or more "tracks" of action--to, in effect, write as if you were editing film. As I've said, because my students had done some "editing" themselves during our pre-viewing activities, they were better able to appreciate the marvellously subtle way in which the fight sequence is edited--a number of my film

buffs compared it to the baptism sequence in The Godfather. Those activities also, I feel, served as a vital prelude to Madeleine's writing and talking, prepared my students for the level of specificity at which they would encounter her. In any event, the class responded very strongly both to the film's main event and to Madeleine herself--both to the film's "action sequence" and to its "leading lady." In fact, a number of students, and not all of them were women, resented the way Madeleine's husband acted during their conversations: these students found him smug, threatened, subtly domineering. A few of my "Freudians" saw Elvis as an erotic choice on Madeleine's part, and comparisons were made between Elvis and John, comparisons that made me glad I wasn't John. However, as much as the class liked Madeleine, as much as they might feel protective toward her, they couldn't forgive her for choosing Elvis Yero as a subject over Elizabeth Verrick. This insistent criticism provoked another piece of writing, one that led us away from the film, but prepared us for Madeleine's article.

Round Three: Post-Viewing Activities

I had my students do their own piece of reporting on Elizabeth Verrick. While I replayed those scenes in which she appeared, the class took notes. Afterwards we talked about Elizabeth Verrick, speculated about her and her life at some length. I asked my students to create a background for her--one that while completely imaginary would also be

totally plausible. (This is of course a variation on that old assignment used to get students to respond to a character in fiction.) Many of my students were heartless, even at NYU where there was less of an age barrier: Elizabeth Verrick was characterized as neurotic, domineering, meddlesome rather than philanthropic. The backgrounds my students created for her all tended to be stories of parental neglect, broken relationships, even sexual frustration. Because her past had been so barren of affection, she was at present a bossy, driven old lady. For evidence, my writers pointed to her nervousness--smoking, and so on--and to her ubiquity, which they refused to see simply as a result of the fact that Madeleine followed her and the camera followed Madeleine. Some even went so far as to interpret her philanthropy as the sublimation of aggressive urges. There's something about Elizabeth Verrick--maybe it has to do with the sense of obsessiveness she projects--that brings out the Freudian in almost everyone.

Though my students almost all agreed that Elizabeth Verrick was a better story than Elvis Yero, the problem they had with her was analogous to that which Madeleine had: they too couldn't find a way of telling her story without writing either a routine feature or a typical exposé. Elizabeth Verrick was great material only if you didn't have to write about her. The class began to see the advantages

of Elvis over Elizabeth Verrick as the focus for a story, as a subject that would generate a rich, but not unwieldy narrative. (With Elizabeth Verrick, it had to be a case of saying either a great deal or very little; Elvis represented a mean, material that was both immediately interesting and manageable over the long haul.) Elvis's struggles are, thanks to books and film, so familiar, so much an "old story," that they are almost ritualistic. And therein lies their fascination: they are vivid, coherent activities leading to definite, irreversible outcomes--guilty, not guilty; loser, winner. Once again my students and I returned to the Rocky movies; this time, though, there was more of an emphasis upon the reasons for the traditional popularity of the fight film. The class argued that when the story is about a boxer the "moment of truth" is both inherent and very dramatic, that whatever the specific storyline it will delay that moment while giving the impression of leading up to it.

The attempts of my students to deal with Elizabeth Verrick, then, led to a sense of empathy with Madeleine. A story on the inmates would be too amorphous. Elvis was the best choice. And my students were now as prepared as they ever would be for Madeleine's article. I gave them a chance to read it thoroughly at home before we discussed it in class. They noted how Madeleine had used a cinematic approach as well as the prizefight structure. (At NYU there

was talk of the three-round format as thesis, antithesis and synthesis, but only a couple of the more daring in that group ventured to go further than mentioning the terms.) In class we numbered each section of the story--that is, each segment that seemed a whole in itself--and then reconstructed the chronology by devising a numerical table. Most of my students remembered the points about "powerful grammar" that I had emphasized during our pre-viewing activities--the present tense for the main event, the past for flashbacks. All of my students admired Madeleine's prose, envied it, and were struck by the seeming inevitability of the article's form. The only criticism was leveled at the typography--the captions indicating the rounds. According to some students, that was laying it on a bit thick. They felt that the true form was Madeleine's "cinematography," which employed the three-round sequence as a kind of base or mainstay, and that anything more was in effect less, mere cosmetics.

My out-of-class writing assignment had my students write autobiographically--to describe a struggle of their own, as well as what led up to it and what ensued from it. We each drew up a list of struggles we had faced, choose one, and did some freewriting on it while trying to keep in the present tense (I discussed the role of present-centeredness in Gestalt therapy as a means to facilitate dream recall). Then we read and discussed the results.

We saw that there is a certain universality or uniformity with regard to human struggle, that most of us struggle at one time or another in our jobs, in our relationships, with ourselves. We also talked about the private and public aspects of certain struggles, the almost ritualistic forms some struggles take, and related all this back to Madeleine's choice of Elvis.

I had my students begin by generating autobiography, by focusing on a "first person" struggle, because I didn't want to put off having them do a formal piece of writing for too long after they had seen the film. As Madeleine's own struggles make clear, finding a subject and then gathering material are time-consuming processes. My students had done at least a few weeks of freewriting already, and, since most of that had been about themselves, their lives, they had already gathered some material to draw upon, and had learned how to generate more without too much trouble. In addition, since my Brooklyn students are almost all ghetto kids attending "Harvard on Flatbush," and since my adults all have to balance full-time employment with nearly full-time education, my three classes, I felt, would have little trouble finding a personal struggle to focus on.

The raw material was relatively easy to unearth in this case. The problem was in finding a "microcosm"--a main event that wasn't too big or too complex for a short

paper. We discussed the possibility of using a typical or representative event--a few hours of struggle, let's say, that emblemized a period of protracted struggle. It was quickly discovered that some struggles are more conducive to a short, tight piece of writing than others, and that some physical action was needed to structure the story (and to make it possible for the reader to "enter in" as well). Boarding a plane despite a fear of flying, let's say, could be made to work only if the focus was upon the physical act of walking those last few steps.

Discussions of material soon became discussions of form. Madeleine used the words "structure" and "metaphor," both of which frightened my students just a little. As for the latter term, anxiety diminished as I presented examples and had students make up their own. And the class had little trouble in seeing the difference between an "organic" structure and an "inorganic" one (a five-paragraph essay, let's say, complete with thesis statement, before which must come a cute anecdote to win the reader over . . . and so on, and so on). Then it was a matter of helping one another see the design a particular struggle seemed either to generate or to be circumscribed by. The person with the fear of flying, for instance, had to face one painful step after another. At one point I invented some of my own "Smarterbook" exercises (If your struggle were a sport, which one would it be?), to give my students both further

exposure to metaphor and assistance in finding a structure--in abstracting one from the material. The class now talked like a group of hardheaded writers. Certain struggles, they realized, couldn't work, because they were too complex, or too amorphous (too "Elizabeth Verrick"). Often the sacred truth had to be manipulated somewhat to ensure a meshing of content and form (I protected my students from self-accusations of immorality by reminding them of Richard Lanham's critique of the C-B-S theory of writing--Clarity, Brevity, Sincerity).

The rest of our discussions were at the nuts-and-bolts level--where and how to put in a flashback, where to conclude (I told them that Peter Bogdonavich said he'd learned from Orson Welles: always cut on movement). And of course all the tricks we had used during our pre-viewing activities again became indispensable: numbering, using cards, color-coding with highlighters, and so on. My course at NYU is called a "writing workshop," but at this point that description fit all three of my classes.

Later in the semester my students will be doing a "go thou and do likewise" assignment. That is, they will have to report upon a struggle faced by another individual. (I hope to have them also do a research paper on a historical figure using the main event/flashback approach.) Before the First Word led my students to see neighborhoods everywhere--the floors of the buildings at Brooklyn College,

for example, contain for some odd reason both classrooms and faculty offices, both noisy students and meditative professors. Similiarly, they now see struggles everywhere, and they have begun to make lists of the Elizabeth Verricks and Elvis Yeros in their own lives. A few of them now want to be newspaper reporters; some say they now like writing; all certainly write better.

Overview

Though the influence that Telling an Old Story has upon student writers can't be assessed only by evaluating the writing done in conjunction with it, I feel that my students have produced some excellent work, that their writing is better now than it was before they saw the film and were involved in the activities I've described. The film has inspired them to take risks with regard to both subject and form. It has, as well, motivated them to be more thorough, more patient: they are now more convinced that writing is indeed a "process," more willing to be guided by it and better able to exert control over it. In short, their exposure to the film has helped my students to write with both greater freedom and more discipline.

Colleagues of mine have argued that my students always improve quite dramatically in the first half of the semester, that it isn't the film which has proven successful, but my approach to it--an approach characteristic of, grounded in, my creativity, experience and enthusiasm.

Because this line of argument is so flattering to me I'm reluctant to rebut it. Rebuttal, however, is an easy matter here, particularly since I'm more familiar with my students than my admiring colleagues could be, and more aware of my limitations with regard to "moving them." The students I have this year are comparable to those I had last--and the simple fact is that the students I have this year are performing better at this point in the semester than the students I had last year were at the same point. This improved rate of progress must owe something to the film, since, as far as I know, I was as good a teacher last year as I am now. And though my exploitation of the film is characteristic of my teaching style, I did things, and had my students do things, I wouldn't have if the film had not been part of my courses. It invigorated me, inspired me to experiment, to design activities and assignments I wouldn't have otherwise. I was the first one in the class to be influenced.

But I don't want to give the impression that the film worked only "through me." It had a direct impact upon my students, just as it had one on me. Not only did it rouse them too, but it also gave them something I cannot: a direct exposure to a particular task of writing done not "for school," but "for real." Sitting there in the dark, my students were liberated from the classroom, from the limitations and artificialities inherent in that situation

no matter how relaxed or creative the mode of instruction. Since all writing students are, simply by virtue of being such, alienated from the profession of writing, many of its hard realities persist as soft abstractions, mere textbook concepts. Telling an Old Story enables writing students first to think like, then to act like, "insiders"; it vivifies for them, makes them feel the urgency of, basic truths about writing with which they are already so familiar, and to which they have been so indifferent.

This is not to say that the film models an approach to writing, that it proposes and demonstrates a "method." In not presuming to do that much, it accomplishes much more. Such principles that the film does illustrate obtain only for a particular writer facing a particular job of writing. They apply "here and now," and, though they offer initial guidance, a bit of direction and encouragement, the first challenge students face when they attempt to use them "later somewhere else" is the need to modify them and extrapolate from them--the need, in effect, to discover their own principles of composition. This galvanizing of creativity, this provocation to diverge, first occurs much earlier, in connection with the film itself: there are, as even the least motivated student will be quick to point out, other subjects besides Elvis available to Madeleine, other ways of writing about him possible for someone with her skill and experience. There's no doubt, I think, that

students learn from what Madeleine does even when they don't accept it. In fact, by criticizing her decisions, rejecting her solutions, they reveal just how superbly educational Telling an Old Story is. Perhaps it can even be said that Madeleine's "teaching" is strongest where her "doing" is weakest, that students are most under her sway when they find fault with her.

The film, then, augments good instruction partly because it works the way good instruction does: its influence is insistent, but subtle--at times almost subliminal. My students are writing better, as I've said; but what's even more important to me is that they are now more fully and creatively engaged with writing; they have become more "professional." What each of them does every school day is now different only in degree from what a writer like Madeleine Blais does every working day. Whenever they take out their pens and notebooks they begin the writer's ritual of question and decision, of difficult trial and multiple error. And they seem to feel better knowing that all of it is an old story.

The three films in the Writers Writing series--Before the First Word, Telling an Old Story, Pieces of a Puzzle--were produced by Learning Designs in cooperation with WNET/ Thirteen of New York. The complete series as well as individual films can be rented or purchased from the Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation / 425 North Michigan Avenue / Chicago, Illinois 60611. Each film comes with Teaching Notes; all are available in the following formats: 16 mm film, 3/4" U-Matic cassette, and 1/2" VHS cassette. Anyone interested in rental or purchase can call a toll-free number, 1-800 558-6968, for current prices. Anyone purchasing all three films qualifies for a 25 percent discount.